

The NATO Emerging in Afghanistan
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by U.S. Ambassador to NATO Victoria Nuland

It's sometimes easy to take our Alliance for granted or to wonder if we are up to the challenge in a place such as Afghanistan. Today, 26 NATO allies and 14 partner nations contribute to the mission there alongside Afghan troops. Three years ago, only a handful of us were fighting the Taliban. The 28,000 non-U.S. forces and 13 non-U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams in place across Afghanistan have allowed American and Afghan forces to focus on the fierce battlegrounds in the east. Countering the insurgency in Afghanistan is a tough mission, but without the help of our allies and partners it would be much tougher.

NATO's decision just over a year ago to take on security responsibility throughout Afghanistan has brought 10,000 additional Canadian and European troops to the south, partnered with roughly 1,000 Australians. This allowed U.S. forces participating in the NATO mission and Operation Enduring Freedom to focus primarily on countering the insurgency in the east along the Pakistan border and to increase training of the Afghans. To strengthen this effort, President Bush decided last year to send 3,500 additional U.S. troops and \$10.2 billion in development and security support to Afghanistan. Many allies joined this effort. Germany has steadily increased its commitment, including deploying Tornado reconnaissance aircraft, more training teams and vital development and counter narcotics assistance.

Just over a year later, districts and villages throughout eastern and southern Afghanistan -- in Ghazni, Khost, Paktika, Nuristan and Konar; in the Sangin valley in Helmand; and in the area south of Kandahar -- are more secure and more accessible than they have been in years -- in some cases, decades. The ranks of trained Afghan soldiers have swelled from 35,000 to 50,000, with the Afghans themselves leading the fighting in some important combat operations. This spring, the United States will send an additional 3,200 Marines to capitalize on the gains and maintain momentum -- 2,000 for combat missions in the south and 1,000 more trainers for Operation Enduring Freedom, focused primarily on Afghanistan's police forces. We are again urging all our allies, including Germany, to match us soldier for soldier, euro for dollar, at the NATO summit in April in Bucharest, Romania.

Despite some dire headlines, there were significant successes in the past year for the Afghans and their 40 international security partners, including all members of NATO. The Taliban's vaunted spring offensive never materialized, and roads, schools, markets and businesses have been built all over the country. But the intense challenges of this mission have also become clear -- for Afghans, Americans and all allies. The insurgents are resorting to the deadly terrorist tactics of improvised explosive devices, suicide bombing, kidnapping and targeted assassination; they kill teachers in front of their students, parliamentarians in their districts and foreigners in the center of Kabul. In areas where security is weak, the Taliban and their drug-lord enablers have pushed more prime land into poppy production. Crime and corruption are on the rise, and the Afghan people grow more impatient every day to see action and justice from their elected leaders. Meanwhile, the international community has struggled to coordinate its efforts.

With the democratic world now supporting them, Afghans see the prospect of living in freedom and security, liberated from the fear and grinding poverty of the past decades. But to reach their goals, they will have to keep fighting -- with arms against the Taliban and with political courage against injustice, poppy cultivation, corruption and economic challenges. They need to know we will stay with them.

NATO, too, is facing the greatest challenge in its 59-year history.

The alliance that never fired a shot in the Cold War is learning on the job. Just as the Iraq war forced adaptation in American military and development tactics and strategy, the Afghanistan mission is forcing changes in NATO. With each passing month, Germans, Canadians, Spaniards, Latvians and our other allies learn more about what it takes to wage a 21st-century counterinsurgency -- a combined civil-military effort that puts warriors side by side with development workers, diplomats and police trainers. Whether flying helicopters across the desert, embedding trainers with the Afghans, conducting tribal councils with village elders or running joint civilian-military Provincial Reconstruction Teams, most allies are reinventing the way they do business. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates made clear last month, this requires new training, new equipment, a new doctrine and new flexibility in combining civil and military efforts in a truly comprehensive approach to security.

The next three to five years will be crucial for the people of Afghanistan, for the NATO alliance and for the community of democracies. The Afghanistan mission is an investment in our collective security; it is also the catalyst for the 21st-century transformation of our democratic alliance. If we can get it right in the Hindu Kush, we will also be stronger the next time we are called to defend our security and values so far from home.

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